



Reading Constellations: Urban Modernity in Victorian Fiction

Patricia McKee

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The changes wrought by industrialization in the nineteenth century were heralded by many as the inevitable march of progress. Yet a fair share of critics opposed the encroachment of modernity into everyday life. Wedding Walter Benjamin's critique of urban modernity with several canonical works of fiction, Patricia McKee's study challenges the traditional ways we look at Victorian literature and culture.

In *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *Jude the Obscure*, and "In the Cage," characters struggle to find a place for the parts of the self that do not fit the conventional image of middle-class Victorian success in the rapidly expanding world of metropolitan London. *Reading Constellations* focuses on this tension, exploring how characters attempt to fit in or adapt to urban society. Throughout, Patricia McKee draws on Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history to examine the aforementioned works of fiction by Dickens, Hardy, and James. The dialectical notion of the "constellation" is deployed in each chapter to read moments in which past and present collide and the ways these writers "open out" the representation of the city to new modes of articulation and-through narrative perception-the reader's perception of the phenomena of the city, its place as the exemplar of modernity, and the ways in which it determines subjectivity. Benjamin's concept of "colportage" is also used as a tool to demonstrate how Victorian fiction distributes and alters various possibilities in time and space.

Ultimately, *Reading Constellations* demonstrates how Victorian fiction imagines a version of urban modernity that compensates for capitalist development, reassembling parts of experience that capitalism typically disintegrates.



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